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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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GRENADA AND FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Almost all the news we have heard of the invasion of Grenada has reflected favorably on President Reagan. This is neither an accident nor the automatic consequence of the "success" of the invasion. Rather, it reflects an unprecedented denial by the United States Government of freedom of the press.

Let me eliminate the first concern of each of us: secrecy. The success of the Grenada operation depended on secrecy. Perhaps the White House feared that allowing press coverage of the invasion itself would have resulted in an intolerable risk that the press would leak plans to the enemy.

First of all, I have never heard of any reporter leaking military secrets to the Soviets, the Cubans, or anyone else.

Secondly, gross inaccuracies and distortion resulted from the fact that White House press officials had been lied to and tricked by their own superiors. Certainly, no one judged a security risk should be working in the White House press office. Press officers should be trusted by the President and relied upon to use discretion in discussing sensitive topics.

Les Janka, Deputy Press Secretary for Foreign Affairs, resigned in anger, bitterness, and humiliation. He felt he had lost all credibility in the journalistic community as a result of the numerous blatant lies he told about events in Grenada. His superiors had tricked him into believing his "information" was accurate.

The call for secrecy certainly does not excuse the fact that the press was denied freedom of movement on the tiny island of Grenada until a full five days after the invasion. During this five-day period, secrets were kept--not from radical Grenadians, Soviets, or Cubans--but, from the people of the United States and the members of Congress.

During the five-day period, the Administration had total control over "information" about the invasion. Even total control did not conceal the fact that the Administration had little regard for truth.

Military officials gave at least four different and contradictory accounts of the American bombing of a mental hospital. First, officials denied that the bombing took place. Then they labelled it an "unfortunate accident". Next, they claimed that a Grenadan flag flying from the hospital "naturally" marked the hospital as an appropriate military

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target. The last I read, Government spokesmen were giving vivid accounts of hostile fire coming from the hospital. "Naturally" the bombing of the hospital was necessitated by the enemy's use of it for military purposes.

I have no idea how we came to bomb a hospital and kill most of its patients. I certainly do not believe it was done with malicious intent. My point here is that the denial of freedom of the press results in the denial of information for all of us.

I understand that there are some high-level Pentagon figures who believe the lesson of Vietnam is to protect the military from press scrutiny. They claim that they were unable to manage the war as they had wished because the press enabled the rest of us to know too much too soon.

Certainly World War II proved that a free press is totally compatible with national security and military victory. At the invasion of Normandy--the most important military operation conducted in the history of the world--courageous reporters and photographers hit the beaches simultaneously with our fighting men. The press cooperated with military sensors. For the most part, Americans learned the truth about the war.

It is impossible to exaggerate the dangers of a government-controlled press. Restrictions imposed for one purpose are easily extended to cover other purposes. Lack of access to news makes even the best news gatherers willing to compromise their professional integrity to get hold of anything newsworthy.

Worst of all, when the press is repressed, the people are denied the vital information on which their political decisions should be made. A public deceived or poorly informed is unfit for participation in the democratic process. A country which does not have a truly free press might just as well dispense with elections.

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